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'*Gulamgiri'* and Caste Today: An Interpretation

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Abstract

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule's book '*Gulamgiri*' (Slavery) is considered one of the Pioneer books. It explores Brahminical supremacy and hegemonies in the social structure of Indian society. It critiques the institution of caste through a 16-part essay and four poetic compositions, and it is written in the form of a dialogue between Jotiba, and a character he calls Dhondiba. The 'Gulamgiri' is a great articulation of Phule in which he also critically evaluated the Indian society with a logical argument. He wrote this book in 1873 for the downtrodden section to make them aware of the oppression in Indian caste system. In addition, the paper attempts to articulate the idea of 'caste system' and 'case domination' from the perspective of '*Gulamgiri*'

Introduction

It is said that pre-British India was the major era for routinizing of the caste system. It is claimed that ritually upper castes like Brahmin, Rajputs, and Baniya (merchant) were central figures of power as a whole. Many instances show that they were a source of legitimacy in maintaining the value system and reinforcing the caste system. Many Rajput castes received land grants (from Mughal kings, British officers, etc.) for their military service, and became a landlord. The result of which, they wielded power in rural areas. The Baniyas were engaged in commercial activities including as a banker, trader,

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and financier to kings. Although certain castes were not 'twice-born', they enjoyed political power, and a fairly high social status (Rao, 1979: 02-03; Prasad, 2016). Ahir caste is the best example for this instance because ritually Yadavs (Ahir caste and its sub-castes) were considered 'none-twice-born' (Shudra) caste, but they had political power and military tradition[i] even pre-British India while due to the privilege of military service, they also demanded 'Kshatriya' status in the social hierarchy[ii].

Another debate on a genealogical understanding of caste can be traced back to the colonial period when the British-Indian government began enumeration of native Indians in 1871. Few anthropological surveys were also conducted in order to understand the socio-cultural life of the people. Few research institutes gave larger details of the local tribes and castes. Few administrative and social reforms (see-Morley-Minto Reforms in India, 1909; Representation of the People Act, 1918, etc.) also took place at that point in time. Resultantly, marginal castes/communities could know about their historical background as well as economic and socio-political status and began organized during the early ninetieth century (Srihari & Prasad 2017). Many new social movements were also initiated during the mid-19th century. Few backward caste associations for instance 'Ahir Yadav Kshatriya Mahasabha, 1910[iii], Gop Jatiya Maha Sabha, 1912 and anti-Brahmin movements especially Satya Shodhak Movement, 1874, Arya Samaj, 1875, and Kurmi Caste Association, 1890 emerged. These organizations projected themselves as "Depressed Classes" for their outfit (Jaffrelot, 2003: 187-97). The above arguments show that the relevance of the book 'Gulamgiri' in the 21st century.

The book 'Gulamgiri' is one of the most celebrated books and a first critique of the caste system. Jyotirao Phule wrote it in his mother tongue, Marathi (a local dialect). The book offers a perspective and needs to examine in different dimensions. The main thrust of Mahatma Phule's text is an inversion of the 'racial theory of caste'[iv]. According to this theory, a superior, foreign race invaded this land, and they became what we know as Brahmins today (Rodrigues, 2005). The lowly, indigenous people who were conquered and became the Shudras (lower castes). In the beginning, he claims that 'the original inhabitants of India were Bali and Hiranyakashyap (as Kshatriyas), and both were

dethroned treacherously by the Aryans of Iran. Brahma, Vishnu, Narad are part of a spurious literature created by Brahmans in order to legitimize their superiority and to enslave the original inhabitants dubbed as Shudras and Ati-Shudras'.

He rejects old conception, 'from Brahma's mouth were born Brahmins'. Phule asks a question, 'from where Christians and Muslims were born. Parasuram, the cruelest person, is adulated and adored and why Brahmins did not spare even God and equated him with 'Brahmans'… they brought him down to the level of fish, pig, and lion through their insidious philosophy of incarnation'. They preferred begging for labor. Later, they connived with Rajputs, from Iran, to massacre Shudras and Atishudras. Author manifests that Jesus was the second Bali whose followers reached India to expose Brahminism. Their attempt to overthrow them failed.

The main aim of Phule was to strike at the unequal social structure of Indian society. Towards this end, he was determined to remove ignorance, illiteracy, prejudices and caste-based beliefs among the lower castes and free them from the mental slavery resulting from centuries of Brahmin dominance. In the first part of the book, he invoked Parshuram, because the latter is considered to have lived for 432 million years, as stated by Brahminical scriptures. 'Phule produced two books under the title 'Brahamani Dharmcharya Aadpadadyat' (Behind the Screen of Brahminical Religion) in which he asserted the ideals, proclaimed by the French Revolution, for freedom, equality, and fraternity scholarly'[v]. Phule was inspired by a great philosopher Abraham Lincoln who had abolished slavery in America in 1863. He dedicate his book to the Black population of America.

Main Thesis of Gulamgiri

Phule begins with a famous quote from Homer (a great Greek poet), 'a man loses half his virtue the day that he becomes a slave'[vi]. The book is in the form of questions and answers, and it relates the history of Brahminical dominance in India. Jyotirao Phule asserts with confidence, 'the Shudras are the life of this nation. In a time of economic and political crisis, the government should rely on them rather than on the Brahmins. If care is taken to ensure that the Shudras are kept happy and contented, the government

will have no cause for doubting their loyalty'. He concludes by demanding that 'the masses should be educated'. We must remember that he was not a trained researcher or a philologist, but he was a champion of social revolution, and his history of the Brahmins and the Aryans is pure fantasy. In Gulamgiri, he explains his main objective of this book. He wrote the present book to warn the 'Shudra' and 'Bahujan' brothers that the Brahmins are a minority, but they are exploiting them." He also manifests that about freedoms which were conditioned by Brahmin students and teachers. After the decline of the Peshwas, a section of the Brahmin community in Maharashtra and some other parts of the country began seriously thinking about ways and means for overthrowing the British.

Jyotirao has described ingrained 'mental slavery' of the non-Brahmin masses (Bahujan). The common people are enslaved and do not desire to be free. The slaves themselves are on their master's side. In America, the free whites were more concerned about abolishing slavery than the Black slaves. In Konkan, British officials set up a system whereby the *ryots* (tenant farmer) could complain against the landowners. The land-holders/landowners made their *ryots* sweat and slave round-the-clock during the Kingship system. In return, they gave them just enough food to subsist their family members. They even thrashed them, if they made any mistake. In spite of this, when the *ryots* gave their testimony, they sided with their master. So, it was essential to educate the public to be free of them from superstition and blind beliefs. Modern education was essential to be free from slavery.

Jyotirao assumes that with the help of modern education, the common people could benefit from the legal system and scientific reforms of the British government, and regenerate itself. In sum, Jyotirao for the first time endeavored to define how Brahminical thoughts, institutions, and castes had come to dominate Hindu society for thousands of years. He felt that it was an important prerequisite of social reforms to dig deep into history to find out when and how Brahmins established their supremacy over Hindu society. This story could be reconstructed from the stories related in the Srutis, Smritis, and Puranas. Therefore, he essayed a historical interpretation of these stories

and concluded critically that in the stories of the ten *avatars* (incarnations of God) the story of Parshuram's incarnation tells the story of the Brahmin's seizure of power.

He has summed up the stories as follows:

1) The Aryans came twice from Iran to India by the sea route and conquered the local inhabitants who were cultivators.

2) This fact was the basis of the story of the *Matsya* (fish) and *kachchua* (tortoise) incarnations of which both are aquatic creatures.

3) The Aryans from Iran could not achieve complete success; therefore they had to use the land route for their invasion. These invasions are narrated in the tales of *Varaha* (boar), *namsimha* (lion-man) and the *Vamana* (dwarf) incarnations. Around the time of the *Vamana avatar*, the Aryan Brahmins completely succeeded in establishing their sovereignty over India. In order to make it last forever, 'they massacred the Indian warriors, that is, the brave Kshatriyas, and even killed pregnant women to end their lineage'[vii].

4) The Aryan Brahmins ruled the people of India directly or indirectly, and to secure their sovereignty, they inculcated in the people's ideas and beliefs that would render them stupid and ignorant.

Concluding Remarks

Phule argued that 'the *Purana* stories display the cunning and conniving nature of the Brahmins. He said that the system of caste hierarchy was created only to create a permanent rift among the various non-Brahmin masses. The Brahmins being a minority in number than other people, they conquered and were able to dominate the masses verily by dividing them with the idea of caste stratification'[viii]. They introduced the practice of untouchability to punish those who had fought them (the Aryans). Even today, there is much social differences whatsoever between the untouchables and the

Hindus. In the last few decades, several western scholars have undertaken research on how the Vedic Aryans, especially the Brahmins came to assume dominance on the original inhabitant. According to Phule, the Vedic Aryans came to India from outside, and fought with the natives, conquered them and established social, religious and political supremacy over them. Jyotirao Phule's theory runs on above lines to reveal the structured oppressions.

Undoubtedly, there are numerous stories in the *Puranas* regarding avatars, which in prehistoric times attempted to publicize the supremacy of the Brahmins and the religion created by them. Phule ventures to build up a detailed history from the stories. It cannot be said that he succeeded in the task for. The stories are full of improbable and strange facts. They describe a God who takes on the forms of a fish, a tortoise, a pig and a lion-man. He sees them as 'metaphors'. He imagines that *matysa* and *kachchua* were some kinds of boats that the Aryans from Iran crossed in to invade India. But there is nothing to support these theories. Besides, even the theory that the Brahmins or the Aryans came from a foreign land to invade India is not very probable. There is no definite evidence for it, or for the theory that the Brahmins of India were racially different from the rest. Hence there is insufficient proof to substantiate the theory that Brahmin domination resulted from the clash between different races or the natives and the foreigners. When differences in occupations, economic inequality, and social status take root and persist generation after generation, they can give rise to class and caste distinctions within a particular race.

Brahmins and Aryans on the one hand and non-Brahmins and non-*Aryans* or *Shudras* on the other must have been pitted against each other in prehistoric India for the sociological reason cited above. The theory that people from foreign lands invaded the original inhabitants of India, resulting in the Brahmin/non-Brahmin or *Aryan*/*Shudra* distinction owes it origin to instances of invasions in British or Mughal history.

Phule claims that Brahmins invaded India, whereas western scholars say that the invaders were Vedic Aryans as a whole, including Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and *Vaishyas*. His theory owes its origin to the contemporary social structure in Maharashtra. The Brahmins in Maharashtra and around south India believed that there were only two

castes—the Brahmins and the Shudras. In north India, there were castes who called themselves Kshatriyas and *Vaishyas* whom even the Brahmins accepted as Aryans. 'Jotiba's conclusion of a Brahmin invasion, based on his reading of the two-caste system in south India, is not convincing. However, it should be remembered that the Parshuram avatar story bears out Jotiba's contention, for the reason that Parshuram was a Brahmin and is said to have massacred Kshatriyas twenty-one times. From this Jyotirao Phule may have surmised that the Kshatriyas did not belong to the Aryan race of Brahmins. But it cannot be denied that his attack on Brahminical scriptures was justified. He rejected the belief that the four castes were born from various parts of Lord Brahma's body. It must be acknowledged that he was right to explode the myth of sanctity surrounding the Brahmins. For example, no scholar can deny that Brahmins in Vedic time ate the flesh of horses and oxen and drank '*soma'* (wine)'[ix]. Phule's criticism of the scriptures is harsh and acerbic, but he has failed in his attempts to study the etymology of Sanskrit and Marathi words. "He need not have ventured into a subject which is a linguist's territory; a point which the late Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, a champion of orthodoxy, made to attack Jyotirao Phule"[x].

Agarwal rightly points that 'orthodox Brahmin failed to invalidate the basic arguments put forward by Jotiba Phule. Further he writes 'Phule's interpretation of the non-Vedic gods of the non-Brahmins is highly substantial from the sociological point of view even today. Even the Brahmins seem to have adopted the important deities and related practices from amongst the non-Vedic scriptures'[xi]. Hence, it becomes very difficult to trace the original religious practices, ideas and deities of the non-Vedic are non-Brahmins. Phule points out that the Brahmins made attempts to ruin the local superior culture, ethos, beliefs, religious beliefs and political system of the non-Brahmins and created a birth-determined hierarchy, imposing belief in superstitions, slavery and a philosophy that put an end to equality among human beings.

Notes

[i] "The Ahir of Rewari fought against the British in the Sepoy Mutiny as a result of which the former were not recruited in the Army till 1904…the present Kumaon regiment already consists of a certain proportion of Ahir soldiers" (Rao, 1972: 81).

[ii] The notion of caste hierarchy depends on certain circumstances. For instance, in [West] Bengal the Vaidyas, as professional native medical practitioners, had a superior status although they belonged to the Sudra Varna (Raychaudhuri 1969: 189; Singh 1994).

[iii] This association also claimed that the Ahirs descended from Yadu dynasty to which Lard Krishna belong. See for more details, "India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics" (Jaffrelot 2003).

[iv] According to Risley (1915), the caste system took its birth after the arrival of Aryans in India. In order to maintain their separate existence the Indo-Aiyans used for certain groups and orders of people the favourite word 'varna', 'colour'. The clash of culture and contact of races crystallized the castes in India.'

[v] Retrieved 29 June 2018, from http://buddhism4you.com/enlightment/mahatma-jyotiba-phule

[vi] Retrieved 22 June 2018, from https://feminisminindia.com/2017/04/14/jotiba-phule-gulamgiri/

[vii] Retrieved 29 June 2018, from http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/phule.pdf

[viii] Retrieved 29 June 2018, from http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/37498

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[ix] Retrieved 29 June 2018, from https://archive.org/stream/Phulwa-Marathi/phule_djvu.txt

[x] Retrieved 29 June 2018, from https://archive.org/stream/JyotiraoPhule-English-TarkateerthaLaxmanshastriJoshi/phule_djvu.txt

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